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ABSTRACT

This brief paper examines issues in service delivery and collaborative partnerships in light of requirements of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 and the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, both of which emphasize the importance of providing access to the general curriculum for students with disabilities and participation in assessments used to measure achievement. Discussion of legal and research implementation issues examines topics such as how to effectively align standards with the individualized goals and objectives of the Individualized Education Program. Other sections consider the changing roles of educators and challenges such as teaching students with an increasingly diverse range of educational needs. Discussion of what works focuses on a model of collaboration developed in Minnesota in which teams of general and special educators work together to identify mutual goals and use negotiation skills to address student needs. Teams are provided with training in collaborative and instructional strategies. A "Five Step Process" of collaboration is illustrated in an attached table. (Contains 20 references.) (DB)

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NCSET Issue Brief

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Issue Brief

Examining Current Challenges in Secondary Education and Transition

National Center on Secondary Education and Transition

Creating Opportunities for Youth With Disabilities to Achieve Successful Futures

A partnership of—

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Collaboration Between General and Special Education: Making it Work

By Michael N. Sharpe and Maureen E. Hawes

Defining the Issue

Throughout the last decade, nearly every state in the nation implemented some type of standards-based reform. Sharing a common mission that all students should be held to high standards of learning, many states have dramatically restructured their educational systems in an effort to demonstrate greater accountability for student results. While most of these efforts have helped states to more clearly articulate what students should know and be able to do, they have also resulted in questions concerning the participation of students with disabilities in accountability systems.

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act Amendments of 1997 (IDEA) (P.L. 105-17) explicitly emphasize the importance of providing access to the general curriculum, so that students with disabilities can meet the educational standards that apply to all children. As a result, special education and general education teachers nationwide now find they need to develop new skills and strategies to meet these challenges. Signifying a period of genuine professional transformation, these changes are leading many in the field to reevaluate service delivery and collaborative partnerships needed to support students with disabilities in general education settings.

What We Know

Legal Considerations

Schools are required to provide access to the general curriculum by giving students with disabilities the opportunity to achieve the same standards as all other students. IDEA stresses the importance of participation of students with disabilities in the general curriculum.

In addition to IDEA, the recently passed Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) legislation, also known as the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001,* (P.L. 107-110), seeks "to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach or exceed minimum proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments" (Sec. 1001, Part A, Title I of ESEA; 20 U.S.C. 6301). This includes participation in assessments used to measure the achievement of all students at the same grade level (Sec. 1111, Part A, Title I of ESEA; 20 U.S.C. 6311 (b)(3).

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Like IDEA, it is anticipated that this legislation will become a major catalyst in influencing the way in which supplementary aids and services are provided in the context of the general education curriculum. As such, there will be a need to increase collaborative teaching initiatives among the entire array of instructional services (e.g., general education, special education, Title I) available to targeted populations.

Research Considerations

A significant challenge faced by all educators will be to maintain high educational standards for all students, while also ensuring that each child's unique instructional needs are met. These goals need not be viewed as mutually exclusive. Standards can serve as the impetus for focused instructional planning for students with disabilities within the general education classroom, resulting in improved achievement. For example, McLaughlin, Nolet, Rhim, and Henderson (1999) reported that many special education teachers believe students have access to a wider array of learning opportunities as a result of standards-based reforms. In addition, they found that special education teachers felt that standards helped them focus their instruction and better define what is required of students. Research findings have suggested that "rather than focusing on deficits, IEP teams now have an opportunity to focus on helping students work toward high educational standards" (Thompson, Thurlow, & Whetstone, 2001, p. 6).

Implementation Considerations

Despite findings indicating that standards can help students with disabilities to achieve, many special educators continue to voice concerns about how to effectively align standards with the individualized goals and objectives of the IEP. In the report, *Educating One & All: Students with Disabilities and Standards-Based Reform* (McDonnell, McLaughlin & Morison, 1997), the Committee on Goals 2000 and the Inclusion of Students with Disabilities acknowledged that standards-based reform initiatives pose many challenges to special educators, especially in regard to implementation. For example:

> *The complicated part is determining how to accommodate individual student needs and provide the special services that some may require, while still affording each student appropriate access to the common curriculum and ensuring accountability for his or her outcomes (p. 176).*

Research (McDonnell et al, 1997; Sands, Adams and Stout, 1995) also suggests that, in addition to facilitating inclusion, special education teachers need to develop a more consistent approach to determining curricula and appropriate content standards for students with disabilities. For example, to what degree should curricula be driven by the special educator and the planning team as opposed to being dictated by local curricular standards?

A further challenge is for both general and special education teachers to acquire the capacity to identify and focus on skills a student needs to meet the standard. To accomplish this goal, some researchers have suggested creating a curriculum base that would provide guidance for teachers on how to include students with disabilities in the general education classroom (McLaughlin et al. 1999). A "curriculum base" generically refers to a set of agreed-upon curriculum practices designed to meet the needs of students in special education. According to Sands et al. (1995), "the absence of establishing such a base that provides direction for special education programs only increases the likelihood that instructional decision-making and practices will continue to be haphazard and widely divergent" (p. 69). Special educators must become more adept in content knowledge and curriculum development, and general educators must understand their role in implementing IEP goals and objectives—that is, how to accommodate students with disabilities within the general education classroom.

Jorgensen et al. (1997) observed that one of the problems associated with the implementation of standards-based reform and participation of students with disabilities is related to the type of curriculum available to students. Advocating for a "preferred" curriculum that is broad enough to work with a wide range of students, Jorgensen suggests that "all teachers use some common curricular elements to design teaching and learning experiences that transcend philosophical differences and that result in a learning environment that challenges and supports all students" (p. 5).

Even though a number of effective collaboration strategies have been developed over the last decade, current research suggests that general educators are still more likely to interact collaboratively with other general educators than with special education staff (McGregor et al., 1998; Prom, 1999).

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Changing Roles

As states increase their efforts to implement standards-based curriculum for all students, educators of all types must develop a wider range of collaboration skills that facilitate cooperative planning and instructional activities. Recent developments indicate the beginnings of an infrastructure to support more collaborative efforts. For example, in their efforts to promote policies and practices to improve educational performance for students with disabilities, the President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education (2002) recommended that "teachers in general education learn about special education" (President's Commission on Excellence in Special Education, 2002). This recommendation is consistent with the legislative priority, *Unified System of Education,* established by the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, which focuses on the infusion of quality teaching on the part of both general and special education teachers. This priority explicitly acknowledges that "the success of all children is dependent on the quality of both special education and general education…and that special education is not a place apart, but an integral part of education" (NASDSE, 2002).

Challenges

In our current model of education, teachers typically maintain a high degree of autonomy and individual decision-making. This has historically been the case for both general and special education teachers. But now, many general educators feel they are being called upon to teach students with an increasingly diverse range of educational needs, and do not feel they are prepared to undertake such a responsibility (Monahan, Marino, Miller, and Cronic, 1997). Similarly, there appears to be growing concern among special educators that the individualized nature of specialized instruction is becoming increasingly diluted in the face of standards-based reforms.

Regardless of how many professional development and training initiatives are implemented, a key factor in the establishment of a collaborative culture is administrative support at the local level. The findings of several studies (da Costa, Marshall, Riordan, 1998; Bunch, Lupart, & Brown, 1997; Idol & Griffith, 1998) involving collaborative activities share a theme that school administrators are highly influential in shaping the school culture and are often looked to as a source of leadership necessary to cause systemic change.

What Works

There is no shortage of creative and innovative strategies to promote collaborative relationships between general and special education personnel. Even though effective ideas and strategies abound, the real problem is how to provide general and special education teachers the opportunity to *apply* newly learned collaborative and instructional strategies in the classroom. It follows, then, that a long-term commitment must be made to provide the necessary training and technical assistance. This requires the active involvement of general and special educators and the support of school administrators.

In recognition of the necessary prerequisites for effective collaboration, researchers at the Institute on Community Integration (ICI), University of Minnesota, and staff of the Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, Division of Special Education (DSE), have designed a training model that provides general and special education personnel with the collaborative planning and instructional skills necessary to meet the needs of students with disabilities within the context of high standards and educational reform. This model, *Collaboration: Access to the General Education Curriculum (*or, more simply, *"Applied Collaboration")* represents a compilation of collaborative and instructional strategies that general and special educators can apply—as a team—in the general education classroom. It should be noted that the *Applied Collaboration* model represents one specific approach with a clear focus on the applied aspects of teacher collaboration. Effective methods and strategies for collaboration have been developed by others (Cook & Friend, 1993; White & White, 1992; Bauwen & Hourcade, 1995; Walter-Thomas, Korinek, & McLaughlin, 1999), and it is likely that even more approaches will emerge in the future.

Intended to be both interactive and dynamic, *Applied Collaboration* is a professional development training model in which teams of general and special educators work together to identify mutual goals and use negotiation skills to address the needs of students with disabilities. An important aspect of the training is that it is *always* delivered by a training team consisting of a general educator and a special educator.

Within the general framework of the training, teams are provided with (a) *collaborative strategies* to increase communication and facilitate cooperative working relationships between special education and general education staff, and (b) *instructional*

strategies in which teams learn about various teaching strategies (e.g. differentiated instruction, shared classroom management) that are "practiced" in the classroom setting. The model is quite simple and kept intentionally so: it relies on a few effective, yet easily implemented collaborative and instructional strategies. For example, **Table 1** outlines the progression of activities in the *Five Step Process* (Minnesota Department of Children, Families and Learning, Division of Special Education, 2002) that each team completes in order to make decisions regarding the instruction of students.

The *Five Step Process* represents a simple but effective strategy for bringing general and special education teachers together to address the academic and social needs of students with disabilities in the general education setting. This process recognizes the unique roles and responsibilities as well as the expertise that each teacher brings to the collaborative relationship. The *Five Step Process*, as well as other strategies used in *Applied Collaboration*, are based on the premise that, irrespective of how effective a particular instructional strategy may be, it must still be practiced and applied in the classroom in order to add to the collaboration and instructional skills available to teachers.

In a survey of applied collaboration pilot sites that took part in training, both general and special education teachers felt that the information presented was relevant to their job roles. **Figure 1** shows the percentages of 67 teachers in response to a question about relevancy.

One of the most critical aspects of *Applied Collaboration* training is a component designed for school administrators to support training activities. This component of the training largely involves leadership development, including strategies for conducting a self-assessment of the school's collaborative culture and techniques for fostering collaboration between general and special education staff. Similar to the process used in *Applied Collaboration*, training is provided to teams of general and special education administrators by their counterparts who have successfully implemented collaborative activities in their districts.

Applied Collaboration represents just one approach to promoting access for students with disabilities in the general education, however, it embodies a wide array of strategies and techniques that have been developed by others for more than two decades. Currently, *Applied Collaboration* activities are embedded in Minnesota's State Improvement Grant (SIG) as

Table 1: The Five Step Process

	Activity	Description
Step 1:	Review the standard, performance task, and curricular demands.	The collaborative general and special education team communicate about the standard that students will encounter.
Step 2:	Discuss the learning needs of the student and the availability of resources.	This step is an opportunity to talk about the specific needs and concerns relevant to the placement of the student. Modifications may be discussed at this stage.
Step 3:	Decide on accommodations for the student and determine responsibility for implementing them.	The general and special education teacher creatively explore the changes that will be implemented to allow the student to more fully participate in instruction.
Step 4:	Monitor, adjust, and provide formative feedback.	This step provides an opportunity for the collaborative team to determine who will be responsible for monitoring the effectiveness of the accommodation.
Step 5:	Evaluate students using established criteria.	Step five provides an opportunity for the collaborative team to clearly identify the target and discuss how students will be evaluated in relation to the target.

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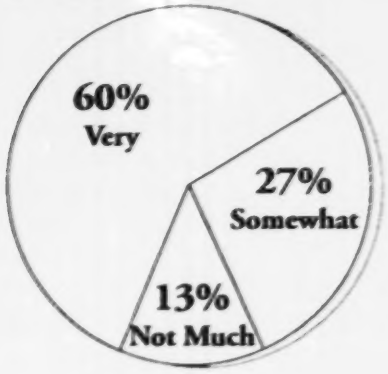
Figure 1: Percentages of 67 teachers who participated in *Applied Collaboration* activities in response to the question: How relevant was this training to your current job?



part of a continuous effort to increase access and improve results for students in standards-based reform initiatives.

Resources

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Web sites:

Applied Collaboration
www.appliedcollaboration.net

Power of 2
www.powerof2.org/

LD OnLine
www.ldonline.org/ld_indepth/teaching_techniques/strategies.html

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